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Trans(forming) Archives: Speculative Biographies of Ethiopians Between and Beyond Genders

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ABSTRACT

Through a speculative reading of crime reports from the 1960 and '70s, this article grapples with the way in which Ethiopians who refuse to be fixed within gender binaries were introduced to readers as social problems. Considering the violence gender-non-conforming people are subjected to – including by some cisgender members of the queer community itself – I closely study some of these archives to ask what could emerge if we engage them imaginatively. I experiment with the crime reports to see what a speculative reading might afford us in writing a history of the present. I subject the reports to speculation on what might have been instead of being loyal to archives and what they present to us. In an act of defying the authority of the archive, which gives a narrow and skewed account of lived experiences, I introduce a speculative biography of three gender-non-conforming Ethiopians in a fashion that moves away from the crime narrative within which they were limited. In so doing, however, I do not claim to recover their voice, their wishes and desires; I rather read a theory of how their existence was made (im)possible/freedom was practised. Though I heavily draw on the crime reports from Amharic newspapers, I juxtapose these with recently produced documentaries, my own childhood memories, ethnography as well as conversations with members of the queer community at home and in the diaspora.

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Introduction to the life of infamous people:¹ Crime reporting from 1968–1972

This article draws on crime reports from the 1970s Ethiopia that I stumbled upon during my research at the periodicals section of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University and the National Archive and Library. The reports about what we might call gender-non-conforming residents of Addis Ababa featured on the first page of the *Polisna Ermjaw*, a bimonthly Amharic police newspaper. I initially hesitated to write anything based on these reports due to fear of reproducing the violence that presented these denizens as criminals. However, through reading Saidiya Hartman (2014) with David Kazanjian (2015), I learnt what we can do with such reports using critical fabulation and speculation as methods in between history and literary writing, and for which an

imaginative reading is necessary. I experiment with rearranging the sequence of events described in the reports and meshing them with oral histories so as to reimagine lives outside of crime framing. I posit that this speculative exercise is useful to write a history of the present that highlights the tethering of contemporary lives to the past.

This article has three sections. First, I briefly summarise the reports and analyse the conditions of (im)possibility that led the subjects to their framing as criminals. Second, I contemplate what possibilities might emerge if we engage the archive through critical fabulation taking my cues from Hartman (2014). Third, I modestly attempt to reconstruct something close to a biography that refuses reduction to the moment of encounter with the police. I reflect on archives as trans/formed in the concluding section. There, I will suggest that we have to be disloyal to the order of archives for them to generate something more than what they tell us on the surface.² I hope to contribute to the incomplete project of the everyday struggle for freedom by reading the 'textual traces they have left in the archives [. . .] as a powerfully political text' that exceed the confines of criminality (Kazanjian 2015, 82). This does not, however, mean that I claim to have represented the voices, wishes and dreams of those I am introduced to in the crime reporting. Nor is it my intension, in writing a speculative biography, to claim to have figured out how they would have wanted their stories told.

Alemayehu Zeleke

'Apparently, The One Who Said I am a Man is a Woman'³ reads the title of a report published on the front page of *Polisna Ermjaw* on 15 Hamle 1961 (23 July 1968 in the Gregorian calendar). The report attributes victory to the police by saying they caught a 19-year-old woman called Alemayehu Zeleke, who was masquerading as a man for the last seven years. This woman wore men's clothing, worked in bars and said they were a man. The police chanced upon this secret while frisking Alemayehu because they were suspected of stealing money from a workplace where they worked as a bartender. Describing what led to this 'discovery', the report states that as a primary suspect, Alemayehu had to stay under arrest. This meant they could not keep any of their belongings and had to be frisked. It was during this frisking that the police 'discovered' their breasts. Police asked why they disguised themselves and chose to live like a man. Alemayehu said they grew up like this, and had no malicious intent, clarifying that the suspected theft and their gender were not correlational. Alemayehu gave the police officers an account of their upbringing as a boy. Towards the end of the report, the police are quoted as saying Alemayehu's manager mentioned another crime:⁴ '*on top of living like a man, she used to pay women to sleep with her*'. Alemayehu denies the allegation, asking: '*[H]ow is this even possible? I have never done any such thing*'.⁵ Knowing that this allegation has serious legal, social and religious consequences, Alemayehu appealed to the heteronormative logic and stated the '*absurdity*' of the idea that a woman sleeps with another woman.

Mulugeta Tessema

Four years later, a similar report appears in the same newspaper: 'The One who hid her Gender for Seven Years got Exposed While Stealing Tsilat'⁶ (15 Nehase 1965/23 August

1972). The report indicates Mulugeta Tessema's being a woman was 'discovered' in the course of investigating their collaboration with the thieves who stole the *tsilat* from a rural parish and transported it to Addis Ababa. The *tsilat* was handed over to Mulugeta after its original thieves suddenly died. It is written that the 37-year-old:

*woman [...] successfully concealed her femininity in the way she was dressed, her typical men's haircut, her masculine physique such as broad shoulders. One might detect her femininity only when she speaks with her soft and low voice. Indeed, when she takes her jacket off and opens her shirt, one can see her saggy breasts through the undershirt.*⁷

And this was what helped the police find out Mulugeta's 'real' identity. The suspect was angry at being caught not because of the consequences of alleged theft such as being jailed for years but because their hidden femininity was exposed. They saw this as God's punishment because of their trespasses related to the stealing. To steal one of the most sacred objects that is central to the organisation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is not an ordinary act. Hence, the consequence is believed to be one that matches the intensity of the crime committed. Any Orthodox Christian Ethiopian would understand Mulugeta's interpretation of being 'outed' as the fitting punishment for the wrong they did. Though rumour spread that Mulugeta cohabited with their female roommate, when confronted, Mulugeta said they never had intercourse with anyone in the last seven years. Like Alemayehu, Mulugeta also pre-emptively tackles the gossip about cohabitation in their answers to the police. Before they were caught by the police, Mulugeta made a living from selling sheep at the market and slaughtering them in exchange for the skin.⁸

Context of criminality

In the report, the two men were made (in)famous through their encounter with power that 'instigated the few words which are left for us of those lives [...] because power desired to intervene, and then judge' (Foucault 1979, 79). Decades later, they are still known as criminals to readers of the newspapers on two accounts: that they presented as men when they indeed were women and that they were thieves despite the apparent misrepresentation of the facts and the hyperbolic narrative built around the theft, particularly in Alemayehu's case. For example, even though Mulugeta did not actually steal the *tsilat*, the title of the report says they did. There is no way of knowing for us otherwise, even if court procedure cleared them of the allegation. They might well be innocent. But the few words that sentenced them as thieves are the only mirrors we are given to see them. This way, their lives, their liberty, their fate get 'played out' in the discourses that produce them as social problems weighing heavily on their existence as ordinary members of the society.⁹ As far as police discovery goes, the two men were living a lie they fabricated. They get framed within the discourse of deception by the report that turns them into an example of how not to live outside of hegemonic scripts. It is not the suspected theft that gets accentuated; it is the gender identity that receives a lot of space and attention in the report. We see their most amplified crime is their refusal to base their gender on their sex.

Two ordinary people who seem to self-identify as men suddenly become visible to us via what the incidents made apparent – the 'discovery' of their breasts and the

misgendering by the police as an act of humiliation. There would not have been a way of 'discovering' anything if the search by the police did not involve a curiosity about their body. It was their breasts that 'exposed' them to vulnerability in the face of power that would curate and publicise a particular story reified by biologically determined anatomy. At this moment, we learn that their body does not belong to them anymore, it is instrumentalised by power to serve as a spectacle of shame. It becomes an important tool for the kind of story the police wanted to tell about the humans in its custody. But far beyond Alemayehu and Mulugeta, their life is used to showcase the costs of nonconforming. Akin to Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí's (1997) critique of determining gender based on one's anatomy, we see that the police were trapped by the coloniality of power in reducing gender categories to visible physiological features. Their breasts are exhibited as testimonies to account for a crime through which we learn of their existence. They are also made objects of ridicule by the logic of heteronormativity that understands gender(ing) only in terms of what it sees. There are layers of violations to be accounted for here, violation that stems from the police tampering with their body, violation that stems from using their body for humiliation by 'outing' them and violation that stems from creating a narrow and simplified version of complex human beings. One must then ask the conditions of possibility that determined their framing as criminals based on the mere fact that they refuse to conform to rigid normativity. Two overlapping points are worth noting here.

First is the socio-economic location of the humans we are speaking of. Both Alemayehu and Mulugeta come from a lowly class of the society. They were involved in marginal socio-economic activities such as bartending (Alemayehu) and petty trade (Mulugeta). Their socio-economic standing becomes a determinant factor for their introduction to us as deceptive. They have no class (broadly conceived) alibi to keep them away from the gaze of power that sentenced them even before due process. Even if the police said they were not arrested for not conforming to gender norms, being searched must have been daunting for the two men, because it was used to misgender and humiliate. It will not be farfetched to argue that these framings will not be experienced in exactly the same ways by all culturally subversive groups because class difference matters. For instance, if we were not speaking about a bartender and a petty trader but instead about someone of a higher class standing and/or member of the aristocracy, we would have had a different conversation. While this is not to imply or claim that those from the higher orders of society have the unlimited freedom to express themselves, we cannot, however, overlook the major role class position plays in allowing some to fare better than others. For instance, an interlocutor involved in sex work told me, *'those who can afford to go to fancy hotels or drive Mercedes are not usually targeted by police'*.¹⁰ That is why we must always be mindful of layers of difference that matter in who is targeted. The classed nature of this targeting cannot be overstated, and we notice it only, as Mumbi Kanyogo (2021) alerts us, if we analyse these encounters with police as rooted in specific historical conditions that create vulnerability. If we limit our analysis to the moment of encounter with power as embodied by the police, we lose sight of the historical conditions of marginalisation and impoverishment that determine the level of vulnerability to or protection by power.

Second and related to this is the broader context in which Alemayehu and Mulugeta lived and moved as well as the role of the media as a mouthpiece of hegemonic discourses. This was a time in Ethiopia's social history when gender norms that have been

taken as natural and universal began to be threatened by a newly educated class of young women and men. The flourishing of *zemenawi* (modern) subjects and the emergence of Addis Ababa as a hub of certain cultural sensibility introduced some laxness in the otherwise rigid norms. Popular culture was gaining a new flavour as a result of this change in the urban centres as aptly analysed in the works of Semeneh Ayalew Asfaw (2022). Though, for example, practices like sex work as well as disparaging media discourses were not new,¹¹ sex work as a manifestation of social decadence and degeneracy was beginning to become salient in post liberation Ethiopia. This refreshment of disparaging discourses is tied to the Italian occupation whose soldiers were held responsible for the expansion of prostitution. What in the words of Raymond Williams (1973) could be called ‘alternatives’, and hence harmless to the dominant culture, begin to be perceived as a threat, reinforcing the moral panic the new wave of young Ethiopians imposed.¹² Why were these subjects (meaning both the topics and the humans) interesting to the police? To control these new threats, media reports of crime become an effective way of instilling a discourse of fear, particularly by targeting the socio-economically marginalised, such as Alemayehu and Mulugeta, as criminals. This brings to mind Anteneh Shitaye’s ‘hegemony in action’, a Marxian concept he uses to describe the role of *Polisna Ermjaw* in crime reporting. Interestingly, *Polisna Ermjaw* was established by the order of Emperor Haile Selassie I in 1961, on the 30th anniversary of his coronation. It was one of the most read newspapers in urban circles, with 150 000 copies being distributed during its first ten years of existence (Shitaye 2020). The first page of the newspaper was always devoted to two news items: one major event or activity that centres on the emperor, and a crime report such as those I introduced above. As such, the newspaper served not only to critique ‘undesirable lives’ but also to ‘reproduce dominant ideology, legitimate the capitalist system, and promote the interests of the ruling elite to the extent that their ways of seeing the world become “hegemonic”’ (Shitaye 2020, 17).

Of coeval lives: Towards a history of the present

What is apparent in the archives and experiences of the present is that non-normative gender positions continue to be depicted as deceptive, and gender continues to be policed. Equally intriguing is the role the police and crime reporting play in turning ordinary people who lead ordinary lives into criminals. A crime investigation documentary released in 2017, as part of a series called *Yetezegaw Dose* (the closed dossier) is a case in point. It introduces Sarah the sex worker who was verbally and physically harassed by a violent mob. One morning, when Sarah was on her way back from work, two young men saw her. The two young men were looking at a woman, as far as they were concerned, only to see Sarah urinate like a man. Alarmed by this unusualness, the young men followed Sarah to ‘determine’ whether she is a woman or a man.¹³ The first time, Sarah managed to escape. But the young men waited for her on another day, and managed to catch her. They confronted Sarah and asked her to reveal whether she is a woman or a man. There was an altercation when Sarah said she is a woman. She then said she is a man and asked them to please let her go. They kept on harassing her. She managed to escape a second time, but the young men chased her, shouting ‘*yazew yazew*’ (catch him, catch him) and asking others to join. She eventually gave up. The mob forced her to remove her bra, her wig and her skirt. They dragged her to the

nearby police station, where she was arrested. She was finally sentenced to two years in prison for deception. Though she confessed to having committed some petty crimes before, such as stealing money from her clients, no evidence was found. Sarah was released after serving her sentence for deception. The documentary, which reduces her life to criminality by reconstructing a narrative that justifies her encounter with the mob, was produced based on the police report. In explaining Sarah's 'deviance', the documentary delves into her 'problematic' upbringing, which leads her to these abnormal indulgences. It offers us a psychoanalysis of Sarah's life. Her upbringing is problematic, in this assessment, because her mother was too indulgent and did not stop her when, at an early age, Sarah began to display some feminine characteristics. The documentary produces a narrative that can be read as a lesson not to engage in crimes of fiddling with one's 'God given gender'.¹⁴ Yet again, an archive of confinement is produced that pre-determines the way we know Sarah only as a deceptive criminal from whose life we should all learn.

Sarah's story resembles the life of Emily, a Congolese transwoman, whom Kanyogo (2021) writes about to emphasise the role of class in shaping the quality of queer African life. Critiquing the liberal roots of rights discourses and their tendency to be gestural, Kanyogo observes that decriminalisation is:

a legal, liberal agenda that only accounts for violence at the point of encounter with an abusive police officer or a transphobic mob and that does not sit with the capitalist conditions that make these multiple registers of violence possible in the first place [...] always already a failed project (Kanyogo 2021).

One wonders if Sarah would have been assaulted had she had a private place where she could change her clothes instead of going to the forest or the backstreets. One also asks if she would have been criminalised had she been invisible to the gaze of the men who handed her over to the police. The hegemonic socio-cultural formation has made masculinity the exclusive domain of men and femininity of women.¹⁵ It also assigns a specific duty to each as a result of which there are jobs only men can do that a woman dare not desire (Paechter 2006). Likewise, there are jobs conventionally left only for women on which men look down. Now, if we simply consider the decision Sarah made from a practical point of view of getting a job, she had to try and pass as a woman. The same goes for Mulugeta. It is as preposterous for a woman to make money selling and slaughtering sheep as it is for a man to work in the sex industry, which both had to do for survival. Without reducing the complexity of their desires to economic gain alone, it is important to take their material circumstances into account. Their experience critiques what is allowed and what is not, and how socio-economic, not just cultural, conditions dictate decisions to perform gender roles. That is why it is problematic to label Alemayehu, Mulugeta and Sarah as deceptive or damaging the hegemonic script that they should have respected and performed in order to be accepted as legitimate members of the society.

These discourses revealed by the archives are obviously not about the humans but the aberration that they are made out to be by power. They are the stories of power that produced them, of the zeitgeist in which their existence was made challenging. The newspaper reports and the documentary effectively demonstrate that violence (in its structural, discursive and symbolic forms) is deployed to fix the problem the three Ethiopians are

made out to be. There is not much else we can learn about their everyday lives as ordinary people who loved, cried, struggled, thrived, worked hard to make ends meet, were vulnerable, were (non)religious, mourned loss, fell ill. Through these archives that confined their lives to the moment of their 'discovery', we are only expected to learn about the consequences of tampering with one's assigned gender and its performance. Yet, how might we use these very materials that disregard the humanity of Alemayehu, Mulugeta and Sarah to go beyond recounting the violence that produced them? What else can we extract that might shed light on the intricacies of culturally and socio-economically marginalised lives? How can we speculate about the lives of Alemayehu or Sarah in way that opens up possibilities for queer Ethiopians? These archives only seem to show how to be silent. How do we recover what is lost in the excessive mendacity that sealed Alemayehu or Sarah's fate? And following Hartman, could it be 'possible to generate a different set of descriptions from the archive'? (Hartman 2014, 6–7)

What if, for example, we disentangle their lives from crime and rework their biographies? These could be meditations Sarah indulged in while walking the streets of today's Addis. She might have asked herself 'how did people like me experience these streets in the past', because Sarah's experience in 2016 simply shows how the lives of gender non-conforming people in contemporary Ethiopia are sutured with those who lived in the 1960 and '70s. These are urgent contemplations because, to borrow from Stuart Hall (2008, 92), 'they are questions which the present puts to the past' to push the project of freedom further. It means that to write differently about Alemayehu and Mulugeta is to write a history of the present that emphasises the coevalness of our lives and 'illuminate[s] the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead' (Hartman 2014, 4). It also means to imagine freedom for contemporary transgender and gender-non-conforming Africans who remain silent, even to their queer cis-gender friends, because they fear being rejected. As recently as 2019, I learnt, during an intense conversation with a trans person in Addis Ababa, that they did not know how to tell their queer friends to stop limiting them to their 'visible biological features'. The conversation challenged what I myself took for granted. I had always thought people who identify as trans are welcome in the circle of the small queer community in Addis, only for me to realise otherwise. This person's experience is not unique; the interlocutor was of the view that transphobia is more rampant within the community than one can imagine.

As a way to get close to this ambitious project of recovering what exists in the confines of the archive, Hartman (2014, 12) insists on indulging in speculative exercises that generate possibilities to write counter-histories as histories 'written with and against the [grains of the] archive'. We (re)read the archive in a way that throws it into crisis to exploit its opacity in order to reimagine what is lost in the production of criminals.¹⁶ In 'Venus in Two Acts', Hartman suggests critical fabulation as a method that rearranges the fabula as the basic element and building block of a story to open the archive to imaginative (re)reading. This entails, 're-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and form contested points of view [to] jeopardise and displace the authorised narrative' (Hartman 2014, 11). While Hartman (2014, 3) acknowledges the challenges of 'listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives', the intent is still to achieve 'an impossible goal: redressing the violence that produced numbers, ciphers, and fragments of discourses which is as close as we come to

a biography'.¹⁷ This practice draws its strength from indifference to truth or falsity as well as from admitting the challenge of recapturing lives as lived in a free state.¹⁸ Taking my cue from Hartman, let me try to disturb the archive to introduce Alemayehu, Mulugeta and Sarah differently. I revamp the crime reporting, rearrange the sequence and basic elements of the narrative and complicate the archive through speculations, ethnographies, childhood memories as well as oral (hi)stories.¹⁹

Towards speculative biographies

Alemayehu

Alemayehu was born in 1949 in a small village outside of Addis Ababa. He was the last child in the family of eight. They named him Alemayehu, to mean that they are hopeful that he brings good tidings. His name symbolises the consolation his parents found in having him after seven of his sisters died. Though he was born as a girl, his parents raised him as a boy. They referred to him with a masculine pronoun, they dressed him like a boy. Unfortunately, Alemayehu lost both of his parents at the age of twelve and was forced to move to Addis Ababa to live with his aunt. Describing the time he spent with his aunt, he says:

*even though my aunt knew I was female at birth, she did not impose a change on me. She treated me the way my parents did. She bought me clothes from the boys' section. She used masculine pronoun to call me. I did not have anything to hide from her. But unfortunately, my aunt fell sick not so long after I moved to live with her.*²⁰

Alemayehu's aunt then went back to her village, and he stayed in Addis, where he began working as a bartender at the age of nineteen. Alemayehu says he was determined to stay the way he was and there was no force, not even the police, that could make him switch his gender to what he was told was the natural thing to do. He also adds an instrumental twist to his manhood, when he says he can protect himself from the rampant rape and other forms of gender-based violence targeting women. Alemayehu was a slender, good-looking man with a darker complexion and a well-picked afro. He was also a devout Ethiopian Orthodox Christian who abstained from sex and was waiting for the right time to become a monk. In fact, he went so far as saying he never had any sexual feelings or attraction.²¹

Thinking about why Alemayehu's parents might have wanted to raise him as a boy, I remember my schoolmate Meseret Taddesse (not his real name) whom we called '*anchi*' (Amharic feminine pronoun) because his parents raised him like a girl child. We were told that his mother wanted to have a girl and because she could not, she treated Meseret like a daughter. Similarly, having lost all seven girl children at birth, Alemayehu's parents felt that they could keep their child away from God's envious eyes by raising him like a boy. This is widely practised in Ethiopia. If we encountered Alemayehu as an everyday person who happens to share his life story, it would not be a story of a criminal who lied but an ordinary person whose gender is beyond what is visible to us when we see him. It is ordinary in the way Abebe Lewé's life was for example. Abebe was born a boy but embodied femininity, performed womanhood and took pleasure in spending his time in the company of women. As a teenager, I knew Abebe as someone who helped my mother and other women with everyday chores such as fetching water and cooking. He

got a modest payment for his service. Instead of being employed by one household, he went from home to home and worked limited hours. He had his home, to which he went back at night. When I first read about the beautiful, witty and clever Yan Daudu, one of the feminine men of Northern Nigeria that Rudolf Gaudio (2009) writes about in his book *Allah Made Us this Way*, my fond memories of Abebe were refreshed. Much like Yan Daudu, Abebe was very playful yet private. Like Alshanzi the man who elegantly embodies femininity and lives on selling tea and coffee in Khartoum's make-shift stalls called *sit alshai*, Abebe knew how to get along with people.²² There was nothing suspect about Abebe's gender flexibility, nor should there be about anyone else's.

While there are variations in times and localities in Ethiopia that might determine how people perform their gender, Mulugeta, Alemayehu, Abebe and Meseret expose the fact that a strict binary of woman/man is not always tenable as far as the mundane goes and certainly not always based on bodily appearances. From elsewhere on the African continent there are rich stories and accounts of gender fluidity that are not frowned upon. In West Africa, as we learn from Ifi Amadiume's (1987) classic about male daughters and female husbands, we see the absence of rigid gender differentiation. Like Amadiume, Oyěwùmí (1997) also exposes what colonialism has done to socio-economic relations by reinventing it within the framework of a binary that is couched in Victorian ideas of respectability that rigidifies gender through biological determinism. Following suit, more recent scholarship explores practices and languages outside of the Eurocentric gender dichotomy. For instance, Zethu Matebeni (2021) uses the notion of '*nongayin-doda*', referring to gender fluidity, and insists that we should move past the binary. Similarly, Siphokazi Magadla, Babalwa Magoqwana and Nthabiseng Motsemme (2021) on Southern Africa, Dankwa (2021) on Ghana demonstrate gender flexibility and show that wo(man)hood is defined by much more than physical attributes. However, gender flexibility becomes a problem within the gaze of power such as the state and the dominant structure that imposes norms as if they are universal and timeless.

Mulugeta

Mulugeta was born a girl in 1935 and grew up in what was then called Selale Awraja about 150 kilometres north of Addis Ababa. Mulugeta lived as a woman until her late twenties. She got married at a young age and gave birth to a boy who died at the age of two. Her husband passed away just a year after their first born died. Four years later, Mulugeta remarried and started a new life with her new husband. But the husband was unkind and abusive, and she escaped to Addis Ababa. Arriving in Addis with no plans, Mulugeta did not know where to go or what to do. The most available option for women who left their husbands was to get a job in a bar, which Mulugeta resorted to right away. However, she did not like the experience, particularly the harassment women were subjected to. One morning, Mulugeta left home for the nearby market and bought herself second-hand men's clothes. He then threw away all his womanly belongings and with it his feminine attributes. He also left the bar and started wandering in search of a new job. Fortunately, an Italian tycoon offered him a job to help with household chores. He was paid 30 birr per month. Due to his good conduct, Mulugeta was promoted to work at a factory as an office messenger and got a pay rise. After working for six years for the Italian, Mulugeta started his own small business because the factory closed. He settled

for selling sheep and complemented it with a slaughtering service. He lived in a rented house with a roommate who happened to be a woman. Speaking of his cohabitant, he says *'people respected both of us, she felt protected by me. No one ever dared to intimidate her because they believed I was her husband'*.²³ Mulugeta was a handsome and broad-shouldered person with beautiful curly hair always diligently styled. His favourite clothes were Navy fatigues often bought second-hand: a white shirt, black trousers and a black jacket.

Mulugeta's trajectory again makes clear that to rely on biology to fix gender is problematic. One might be a woman until the age of 30, as Mulugeta was, but this does not mean that she must or will remain static. Mulugeta also helps us think through the possibility of motherhood, even when someone does not come across as feminine. Oyěwùmí's (2016) insight to think through motherhood beyond gender categories is interesting here because Mulugeta, had it not been for the untimely death of his child, could have been a mother without necessarily performing conventional womanhood. What Mulugeta brings to our attention, yet again, is how one's socio-economic position can either expose or serve as an alibi from what is qualified as deception. For example, there were times when gender flexibility was a virtue, as long as it served the purpose of empire, as we see in the first Amharic historical fiction, *Tobbiya*, which was published in 1908. In this fictitious tale, the young daughter of an army chief follows her father to look for her lost twin brother. Before they leave home, she suggests that she acts like a boy for reasons of safety and convenience as she was on an adventurous journey generally not embarked on by girls or women. This girl turned boy becomes central in rebuilding the Christian empire that is threatened by Muslims and their leaders. What is even more striking is that her changing gender role did not stop the Muslim king from falling in love with her (Debele 2020).

Barkot/Sarah

Barkot was born a boy in 1998 in Hosaena, a southern Ethiopian town. He comes from a humble family and was looked after by his mother, who struggled economically. Despite the economic hardship, his mother bathed him with her love and care. She is the role model in whose footsteps he always followed. When he was young, Barkot liked helping his mother with house chores such as making coffee, cooking, cleaning and running errands. He liked putting on his mother's dresses, particularly during the coffee ceremony. He always chose a dress that he liked on her. Growing up, he was much at ease with exploring and amplifying his femininity. His mother allowed his attractions towards all things feminine. She never policed him but knew how to love him just as he was. At school, he mostly mingled and got along with his girlfriends. When he was a teenager, his mother fell ill, and they really began to struggle financially. He also had to take care of his ailing mother. This is when he began to contemplate his options. Barkot quit school and moved to Hawassa, a bigger city where he thought there were better job prospects. After searching for a job for one month, he gave up and decided to try in Addis Ababa where he got a small job at a bakery for a monthly payment of 400 birr. He realised this was small money which hardly covered his own daily expenses, let alone hospital bills for his mother. One morning, he bought women's clothes and makeup. He changed his name to Sarah. After making sure he could pass as a woman, Sarah started looking for

a job as a domestic worker. She managed to get one, but the payment was still not enough for what she needed. She then took a part-time job as a sex worker to supplement her income. With the money she got, Sarah managed to support her mother until she fully recovered. After a while, Sarah returned to her loving mother to keep a low profile until she figured something out for herself. She is happy that her mother is healthy again and that she is able to spend time with her.²⁴ Sarah is planning to organise her life differently. Renting a place is a priority because she knows that it is crucial for her safety.

When she was still doing sex work, Sarah fell in love with a female sex worker. She remembers this as an awkward moment, because she did not know how to disclose her love without outing herself as a man, and she was unsure if coming out as a man was safe.²⁵ So she let the love die until she finally got over it. Sarah reminds me of the 'tall woman with lipstick' Aftab/Anjum wanted to be in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). Long wig, lipstick, slender, youthful body, cheerfulness, smile, confidence, Sarah's very presence makes her the tall woman who represents Aftab's dream of freedom. Maybe Sarah has read Roy's book, maybe like Aftab, she has felt a burning desire to be the tall woman with lipstick. Maybe Sarah is the 'tall woman' for the Aftabs of Ethiopia who cannot wait to unchain their desires and live in a world filled with as much freedom as the character Bombay Silk does in Roy's novel. Maybe Sarah is for Ethiopian gender-non-conforming citizens what Bombay Silk is for Roy's protagonist, Aftab. She might be the woman my trans friends patiently wait for to act as a guiding light, in their march towards the house of dreams, the gates of paradise, 'the only place in [t]his world where [they feel] the air made way for [them]' (Roy 2017, 19).

A few concluding remarks on trans/forming the archive

Inspired by Hartman, I have (ab)used the archive to try a different reading of the life of Alemayehu, Mulugeta and Sarah. I problematised the reduction of their lives to crime and imagined what their life might have looked like as ordinary members of society. In conjuring up these short biographies, I had to reject the lies the three people were accused of living and in turn emphasise the lives they actually lived as much as the material allowed me. I assembled the fragments from what they told the police, complemented it with what I learnt from my conversations as well as lived experiences and expanded through speculating on what could have been. To recover their humanity, their ordinary life and the trajectories that shape their existence, I heed Avery Gordon writing (in Judith/Jack Halberstam 2005, 33), 'to hear the unspoken, and to see the invisible(ised)' behind the discourse of crimes that shape the narratives. I tried to foreground their stories as subjects with a complex personality that was shaped by histories and socio-cultural, economic and political formations. Some speculation, ethnography, oral history, already existing literature from other parts of the continent and childhood memories of Meseret and Abebe have been instrumental.

In the process, I hoped to transform the archives from being *about* the violence that produced criminals to *a site of* reimagining the biography of the humans existing in between and beyond the normative. It could be argued that a source on gender-non-conforming Ethiopians has emerged from the very material that framed them as criminals. Archives are certainly not interesting for merely providing us with evidence – such as about the existence of queer Africans in pre-colonial times – unless, as has been

argued by Keguro Macharia (2015), they (should) generate new method(s). As a way of throwing archives into jeopardy, opening them to speculation and rearrangement, critical fabulation is arguably one of the methods that emerge. To enable some form of reading that upsets conventions that dictate work on and with archives, we have to be disloyal to their order and the factuality they presuppose. We disobey the 'discursive regularity' of the archives that claims to dictate the terms of what can and cannot be said (Kazanjan 2015) by trespassing the boundaries of both archive use and history writing parameters. Archives cease to exist as we know them because of the crisis as method that allows us to reread them to engage in what they do not tell us. In other words, we 'burn the archive', not in order to make way for amnesia, as Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz (1995) say, but to gather the ashes and breathe new life into them so as to tell a story that cannot be reduced to their violence.

Note

1. This title is adopted from Michel Foucault's 'The Life of Infamous Men' (1979), in which he notes that individuals he came across in the archive – in police reports and medical records – were ordinary until their encounter with power. But with this encounter, we only get to experience the violence that produced them, not necessarily their lives as ordinary humans.
2. Engagement with archives is exciting when order is 'no longer assured' and when 'the limits, the borders, and the distinctions have been shaken by an earthquake from which no classificational concept and no implementation of the archive can be sheltered' (Derrida & Prenowitz 1995, 11).
3. All translations from Amharic to English are mine.
4. 'ወንድ ነኝ ያለው ሴት ሆና ተገኘች' [Apparently, the one who said I am a man is a woman]', no author, *Polisna Ermjaw* 15 Hamle 1961 [23 July 1968].
5. 'ወንድ ነኝ ያለው ሴት ሆና ተገኘች' [Apparently, the one who said I am a man is a woman]', no author, *Polisna Ermjaw* 15 Hamle 1961 [23 July 1968], page 8.
6. A *tsilat* is a replica of the arc of the covenant that is found in every Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It is seen as expensive and sacred.
7. 'ሰባት ያታዋን ደብቃ የኖረችው ጽላት ሰርቃ ተጋለጠች' [The one who hid her gender for seven years got exposed while stealing tsilat]', no author, *Polisna Ermjaw* 15 Nehase 1965 [23 August 1972], pages 1 and 4.
8. 'ሰባት አመት ያታዋን ደብቃ የኖረችው ጽላት ሰርቃ ተጋለጠች' [The one who hid her gender for seven years got exposed while stealing tsilat]', no author, *Polisna Ermjaw* 15 Nehase 1965 [23 August 1972].
9. Using 'played out' Foucault (1979, 78) points to the real-life consequences of the discourse of criminality on these individuals.
10. I had this conversation in March 2017 with Sami Tamene (name changed), a sex worker whose views are shaped by his experiences of going to places with rich, mostly foreign visitors. Interestingly, he has a comparative perspective because he observes how the police treat him when he is alone or with other friends in relation to when he is going out with rich men who take him to five star hotels and high-end restaurants.
11. For example, a debate running over some weeks in one of the earliest Amharic newspapers, *Berhanena Selam* (light and peace), dating back to the 1920s tells of rampant prostitution and how much the educated elite and state wanted to rid Ethiopia of prostitutes.
12. Williams writes of the existence of alternative and oppositional cultures in relation to the dominant one. Their existence as such is subject to historical variation. In some circumstances, what has been alternative and hence left alone begins to be regarded as a threat

to the dominant. In 1960s and 1970s Ethiopia, there was a shift to sex work being perceived as a threat to hegemony.

13. Exactly why the men followed Sarah remains a mystery, and the police investigation focused on Sarah's (petty) criminal record. Which bodies are respected, and why did the police not puzzle over two men following a woman into the forest? What would have happened if she were a 'real' woman? Could Sarah have feared that they were going to rape her? Has anybody asked how she felt? Why were the police not interested in such questions? Why did the young men want to follow her? Why did the documentary not ask these questions?
14. 'Ketezegaw Dose - ከተዘጋው ዶሴ. Episode - 10' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhFQGNfr-YM>.
15. This confinement of masculinity to men has been subject to debates and criticisms by theorists such as Judith/Jack Halberstam (1998) and Judith Butler (2004).
16. To throw archives into crisis means to admit that they, according to Stuart Hall (2008, 92), 'are not inert historical collections. They always stand in an active, dialogic, relation to the questions which the present puts to the past'.
17. Here, Sadiya Hartman (2014) refutes Foucault's (1979) designation. In his piece on the lives of infamous men, he almost gives in to accepting the impossibility of grasping their lives by looking at the very material that brought them to our attention in a problematic way. Hartman pushes the limits of what can be done with archives but seems to realise that some history writing conventions have to be violated in order to do so.
18. For 'an indecision between true and false', see Foucault (1979, 90).
19. A similar attempt at humanising the life and histories of those on the margins of heteronormativity was made by Marc Epprecht (2008), whose work draws on interviews and archives. Epprecht experiments with vignettes and engages them imaginatively to reconstruct more humane histories of sexually minoritised groups in Southern Africa. While he focuses on sexuality, due to the nature of the materials I engage, mine are specifically focused on gender.
20. 'ወንድ ነኝ ያለው ሴት ሆና ተገኘች' [Apparently, the one who said I am a man is a woman]', no author, *Polisna Ermjaw* 15 Hamle 1961 [23 July 1968], page 8.
21. 'ወንድ ነኝ ያለው ሴት ሆና ተገኘች' [Apparently, the one who said I am a man is a woman]', no author, *Polisna Ermjaw* 15 Hamle 1961 [23 July 1968].
22. I frequented a small coffee and tea stall that was run by Alshanzi, in the Khartoum neighbourhood where I stayed in 2022. I was told that Alshanzi's approach is unique (he was described as queer) in that he embodies and performs femininity unlike the other men who conduct themselves and arrange their make-shift coffee shops differently.
23. 'ሰባት ያታዋን ደብቃ የኖረችው ጽላት ሰርቃ ተጋለጠች' [The one who hid her gender for seven years got exposed while stealing tsilat]', no author, *Polisna Ermjaw* 15 Nehase 1965 [23 August 1972].
24. 'Ketezegaw Dose - ከተዘጋው ዶሴ. Episode - 10' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhFQGNfr-YM>.
25. Ibid.

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